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ABSTRACT

The Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project (LAAMP) has several initiatives, including Parents as Learning Partners (PLP), that attempt to assist parents and schools to work collaboratively in order to increase student achievement. Using PLP, one of LAAMP's major parent engagement initiatives, as a model, this paper discusses using both internal and external evaluations to provide a better understanding of how to implement parent involvement programs. An external evaluation team has been hired by LAAMP to evaluate PLP through a longitudinal and quasi-experimental design to track parent-child pairs over time. Six PLP and six non-PLP schools were compared to determine the impact of parent involvement. The internal evaluation of PLP was carried out by LAAMP in collaboration with the schools and school families. Advantages and weaknesses of both internal and external evaluations are discussed. It is important to use both types of evaluation to evaluate and continue implementing a parent involvement program. (SLD)

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The Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project: "How Can Internal and External Evaluations Help Improve Parent Involvement Programs?"

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The Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project: How Can Internal and External Evaluations Help Improve Parent Involvement Programs?"

Introduction

It has long been established that children whose parents are involved in their education experience more academic success. With this in mind, the Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project (LAAMP) has several initiatives, including Parents As Learning Partners, aimed at assisting parents and schools to work collaboratively in order to increase student achievement.

These initiatives use as a theoretical framework Joyce Epstein's research[1] on home/school partnerships. Epstein outlines key elements in partnership-building: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the community. When parents are supporting academics in the home and in the school, a partnership is formed between the parents and the school that provides a supportive environment where children can succeed.

LAAMP's parent engagement initiatives seek to improve academic achievement through the creation of these partnerships. The initiatives focus on utilizing Epstein's six key elements to more effectively create a partnership between the teacher and school. In addition to implementing these initiatives, LAAMP has and continues to evaluate these programs, both internally and externally. These evaluations determine the quality of program implementation, areas needing improvement, and what assistance and support is needed.

Using Parents as Learning Partners, one of LAAMP's major parent engagement initiatives[2], as a model, this paper discusses how utilizing both internal and external evaluations

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[1] See Epstein, J.L., Coates, K. C., Salinas, M. G., and B. S. Simon (1997) School, Family and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action. Corwin Press.; Epstein, J.L. (1995) School/family/ community partnerships: Caring for the children we share. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76, 701-712.

[2] LAAMP has another major parent engagement initiative, Families in Schools. It is a collaboration between LAAMP and the Parent Institute for Quality Education. Twenty-nine schools in three school districts participated in a nine-week parent education course. Course graduates then participated in a four month coaching component

can provide a more complete understanding of how to best implement parent involvement programs. Utilizing both evaluation strategies is particularly important to parent involvement because of the numerous and diverse stakeholders that are needed to create a successful school-home partnership. Both evaluations, internal and external, have their strengths and limitations. Overall, having both evaluations occurring concurrently and communicating continuously with all evaluators can provide organizations and schools with a powerful tool to improve academic achievement through improved home/school partnerships.

Parents as Learning Partners (PLP)

The Parents as Learning Partners grant was awarded to 33 schools in three school families[3] in Los Angeles County. The five-year grant from LAAMP was funded by the Weingart Foundation, Annenberg Foundation, and the participating school districts and school sites. PLP focuses primarily on three of Epstein's key elements: communicating, parenting and learning at home.

PLP aims to improve these areas through professional development for teachers, parent education and other school services. The professional development for teachers focuses on how to better communicate with parents, how to incorporate volunteers in the classroom and utilizing homework that involves both the child and the parent (interactive homework). The parent education focuses on communication with teachers and providing learning support at home. The grant also provides school services including personnel to assist with outreach and provide parents with an additional source of support and communication with the school; lending libraries to encourage parents and children to increase the amount of reading in the home; child

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where parents were encouraged to practice behaviors that contribute to higher student academic achievement. See Johnson, Deborah and Jiang, Ying Hong (2000). Families In Schools: How Did a Parent Education Program Change Parent Behaviors Related to Student Achievement? New Orleans: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association.

[3] A "school family" consists of the elementary, middle and high schools in a feeder pattern or neighborhood.

care and translation services to facilitate parent participation in workshops; volunteering and other school activities.

PLP also works with each school to implement and support the school action team. The action team is comprised of administrators, teachers, staff, parents, parent ambassadors[4] and community representatives who work to facilitate partnerships in the school. The action team is responsible for creating an action plan, which details the parent involvement efforts at the school. The action team works to determine what parents, teachers and the school, as a whole, needs in order to improve the home/school partnerships.

Each school family, a collection of schools that follow the feeder pattern from elementary to high school, has a full-time facilitator funded by the grant who works to provide guidance and technical support. The School Family Facilitator assists each action team and works with the school to provide professional development, parent education and other services.

External Evaluation

An external research team has been contracted by LAAMP to evaluate PLP. This evaluation integrates a longitudinal and quasi-experimental design to track parent-child pairs over time. Six PLP and six matching non-PLP schools are compared to determine the impact of PLP on parent involvement, teacher participation and student achievement.[5]

The evaluation revealed some significant findings. First, a larger number of PLP teachers participated in professional development in the area of parent involvement although it was mostly informal. Nevertheless, teachers did not feel prepared to engage parents. Teachers also reported that parent involvement, such as classroom visits and volunteering, was low. Even

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[4] Each school family utilized a different name for community members hired to work on parent involvement. These groups of people were called Parent Ambassadors, Parent Mentors and Community Representatives. Even though they held different titles, their work was essentially the same

[5] For a more complete description of the external evaluation, see Quigley, Denise D. (2000) Parents and Teachers Working Together to Support Third Grade Achievement: Parents as Learning Partners (PLP) Findings. New Orleans: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association.

though PLP has invested a large amount of money on installing phone lines, few parents were receiving calls from teachers.

Parents report being more aware of parent involvement activities but there has not been an increase in parent participation at these events. The evaluation also found the student achievement at PLP schools is slightly better in reading than in non-PLP in one school district. No differences were found in math and language arts.

Based on this information, PLP has several plans to improve teacher-parent communication. There continues to be a need for more professional development since teachers do not feel prepared to engage parents, even though PLP teachers reported participating more in professional development than non-PLP teachers. PLP will offer more professional development for teachers. In addition, a teacher training curriculum in parent involvement is being developed in conjunction with California State University, the largest teacher-training institution in California, to assist new teachers in this area. PLP is also redefining the role of the PLP facilitators in order to increase their capacity to assist school action teams and provide professional development to teachers.

PLP Internal Evaluation

At the end of 1998-1999 academic year and continuing into the1999-2000 academic year, PLP's third year, LAAMP in collaboration with the schools and school families conducted an internal evaluation of PLP. The evaluation consisted of day-long site visits to each school. All stakeholders, including parents, teachers, principals, parent ambassadors, teacher's assistants, coordinators and action teams, were interviewed in focus groups that lasted from thirty minutes to an hour. In addition, the site visit team reviewed documentation such as meeting agendas, parent workshop schedules and sign-in sheets, etc. There were two goals for these visits:

1. What challenges is the school facing in creating school/home partnerships to improve academic achievement?

2. What areas of need are common to PLP schools and what actions does the project staff need to take to meet the needs of the schools?

What challenges is the school facing in creating school/home partnerships to improve academic achievement?

By conducting an internal evaluation, it was possible to focus not only on the areas of need that were found in most of the schools but also to learn about issues that were particular to a given school. Individual school sites have different challenges and needs and by visiting each school, these challenges emerged. For instance, one school did not have the space to house the Parent Center and had to utilize the auditorium to conduct workshops and other programs. As a result, few workshops were being offered which made it more difficult for PLP parent ambassadors to reach parents. Another school had not been able to hire a parent ambassador and the teachers were shouldering the responsibility of implementing PLP.

These visits also provided examples of creative ways that schools were reaching out to parents. Several schools found that their parents were most available on the weekends and began offering Saturday workshops with great success. Another school had a reading event during the day where parents came to school with their children and participated in reading activities. As a reward for their participation, the school gave the parents two books to take home. This event was very successful and attracted many parents who spent the morning reading with their children.

Schools also found innovative ways to increase parent-teacher communication and to inform parents of upcoming events. One school has "Breakfast with the Principal" each Thursday. This provides parents with an opportunity become better acquainted with the principal and to begin a dialogue about how to better support children's learning. The principal utilizes this time to discuss ways parents could support their children and what programs are

available for parents. "Coffee and Conversation" provides parents and teachers with an informal opportunity to interact. In an another school, parent volunteers bring coffee and cookies to the front of the school in the mornings. Parents can stop by the table and have a cup of coffee and learn about upcoming events and activities at the school.

The visits also illuminated the challenges that the school had not yet noticed. At one elementary school, instead of assigning homework daily, the teachers were sending homework packets each Monday which were to be completed and returned each Friday. By doing so, the teacher wanted to give students and parents more freedom in deciding when to do their homework. In this way, if students had a soccer game or the family had another event on a given evening, they could do the homework on other nights. The teachers also felt that the packets taught the students to be responsible for pacing themselves and utilized it as another way to teach discipline. Without being asked about the homework packets, parents expressed concern about them during the focus group. They were upset that teachers were not instilling discipline in their children because they were not assigning homework daily. Instead of finding the packets to be positive, the parents were upset that they were being utilized. During the site visit, the school learned that there was a need for further communication between parents and teachers about homework packets so that both parents and teachers were working towards the same goal of developing positive habits regarding homework completion in the children.

The site visits also provided an opportunity to determine how much support school site administrators were giving PLP. Some administrators were actively involved in implementing their action plan. Other administrators seemed to agree that more needed to be done but did not take steps that would further partnerships at the school. In order to support both those administrators who were actively working with PLP and especially those who were more marginally involved, PLP hired a principal who recently retired from a PLP school to provide

coaching and technical assistance to the administrators and the action teams at individual school sites. The retired principal understands the many demands and challenges facing a school and can assist each school to find creative solutions.

What areas of need are common to PLP schools and what actions does the project staff need to take to meet the needs of the schools?

In addition to individual differences, visiting all the school sites pointed to trends that were found across most schools. These trends included common successes such as successful workshops. For example, schools found that workshops where parents created items such as flashcards or cassettes that could then be utilized with their children at home had been very successful. Similarly, a fundamental part of PLP has been to employ community members to work as parent ambassadors for the school. The parent ambassadors are members of the action team and work to improve outreach to parents. In addition, parent ambassadors provide workshops and coordinate childcare during events. All schools found that the ambassadors were significantly improving parent involvement and their outreach was very effective. In addition, it was found that they had also experienced personal growth.

There were also challenges that most the schools are facing. For example, effective implementation of the school action team was one of the biggest challenges facing schools. Schools were at different stages in the development of an action team ranging from not having an action team at all to one having consistent members and regular meetings. Some schools made the action team one of the standing committees at the school. Other "action teams" merely consisted of an administrator and the community representative. Most action teams found it challenging to recruit and integrate parents into the team. It was clear that all action teams needed more guidance and support in becoming a strong, permanent part of the school. As a result, PLP facilitators and the retired principal will spend more time working directly with action teams. The facilitators will work with school action teams to evaluate which elements of

their action plans have been most effective and what aspect need improvement. In addition, each school will create a three-year action plan that will guide the work for the final two years of the grant as well as how the school plans to sustain its partnership efforts after PLP funds end.

Similarly, even though schools had had varying degrees of success reaching out to parents, all schools were still in need of ideas about how to reach out to an even larger number of parents. Even though Parent Ambassadors were reaching more parents, the numbers overall were still low. Parent workshops often had twelve to fifteen parents in a school with at least 600 students. Few strategies have been implemented to reach parents who do not attend activities at the school site. PLP is creating a "Best Practices Booklet" to share ideas among the schools about effective strategies, such as those described above.

Communication between teachers and parents needed to improve. It was infrequent and the quality of the conversations was often poor. Teachers did not know how to best utilize parents in the classroom and communicated with parents only when problems arose with the student. Most teachers relied only on Back to School Night, parent-teacher conferences and Open House to communicate with parents. The internal evaluation revealed the need for more professional development in the area of parent involvement and partnership building. Among topics that would be covered included making positive phone calls about students; calling to welcome parents and children at the beginning of the school year and conducting effective parent-teacher conferences.

The internal evaluation provided the PLP staff with an opportunity to take an "inside" look at schools in order to determine what steps PLP needs to take at individual schools and across school sites. It was a valuable tool to find areas of strength and challenges that may otherwise not have been obvious. The evaluation provided the schools and school families with

recommendations that will inform their work in the coming years. It was also an opportunity to provide schools with promising practices that had been successful at other schools.

Even though the internal evaluation was extremely successful, there were also limitations to this type of evaluation. Parents commented that their children were experiencing more success, however it was not possible to determine whether academic achievement was being affected by PLP. In addition, focus groups were not randomly selected. In some cases the people who attended were those that were most knowledgeable or most supportive of the work of PLP. For instance, sometimes the parents that attended the focus group were the parents who spent the most time at the Parent Center or who volunteered often. Although the schools were asked to invite a cross-section of people for the focus groups and interviews, this did not occur. Therefore, it was not possible to determine if the views expressed by those participating in the focus groups was representative of the rest of the school. Furthermore, it was not possible to determine which of the many activities that were occurring at a given school were most likely to support student achievement.

Internal vs. External Evaluations

In deciding between an internal or external evaluation, organizations and schools need to consider factors such as time, budget and reasons for the evaluation. Depending on the answers to these questions an internal or an external evaluation may be more appropriate.

Internal Evaluation

Internal evaluations have several key advantages. They are more timely. Immediately the program has information that begins informing their decisions. Due to the nature of the PLP External Evaluation, it took several months before LAAMP had any results about the program. Similarly, programs can immediately make changes to the program.

As was stated earlier, when evaluating a program that is in more than one school site, internal evaluations can reveal school specific challenges or successes. The PLP site visits revealed many very specific challenges facing an individual school.

Internal evaluations also have the buy-in of the people at the school site because they are part of the evaluation. Each school wanted to contribute to the evaluation and were excited about the opportunity to have their voices heard.

On the other hand, internal evaluation requires staff time. School Family Facilitators, LAAMP and district personnel spent a considerable number of days conducting the site visits for PLP. School sites were also asked to take time to host the visit. All of this time is taken away from other responsibilities and activities that could be done. Similarly, some areas cannot always be addressed by internal evaluations. The fact that those involved are evaluating the program creates for some bias that may prevent certain information from being found.

External evaluations

External evaluation can provide a more objective view of the program. External evaluators, who are not involved with the day to day operations of the program, may consider factors and methodologies that should be measured that may otherwise be overlooked. The external evaluation of PLP focused on following parent-child pairs to determine if the work of PLP is contributing to student achievement. This type of evaluation is beyond the scope of what the personnel involved with PLP would be able to do. As part of the evaluation, the effect of PLP on student achievement provides important information that necessary to determine the areas of success for PLP.

External evaluations also offer more credibility for people outside of the program. Funders, parents, community members, and the public at large view external evaluations as more

objective than those conducted by internal program staff. In addition, when programs achieve positive outcomes, an external research team can add credibility to the findings.

However, external evaluations can be more costly and take more time. In addition, it is difficult to control the factors that will be examined by outside evaluators.

Conclusion

Both internal and external evaluations have strengths and limitations. Participating in both types of evaluations, it has been come clear that it is important to utilize both in order to successfully evaluate and continue implementing a parent involvement program. Given the different people that are needed to implement a parent involvement program successfully, it is important to evaluate as many facets of the program as possible. At the same time, program funders and organizations also need to provide measures of success. As such a combination of internal and external evaluations can provide the most reliable and thorough understanding of any parent involvement program.